



# **ASEAN Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects**

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# ASEAN Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects

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## **An Intelligence Assessment**

*Research for this report was completed  
on 19 June 1979.*

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The report was coordinated with the National  
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**ASEAN Security Cooperation:  
Problems and Prospects**

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**Key Judgments**

Singaporean leaders have revived their call for closer military and security cooperation within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). They want the subject discussed at the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting and at subsequent summit meetings in Bali in late June and early July. The idea of closer military cooperation has been widely, though privately, discussed among ASEAN members since the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea earlier this year, but thus far no government head other than Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew has endorsed it. Prime Minister Hussein Onn opposes the idea as against Malaysia's hopes for a neutral Southeast Asia. Indonesian President Suharto and Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak, while favoring increased bilateral military cooperation among ASEAN members, believe trying to give ASEAN a military aspect would not only be unworkable, but also might provoke an adverse counterreaction from Vietnam. President Marcos of the Philippines refuses even to discuss the possibility of a military pact [REDACTED]

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Military leaders in Indonesia and other ASEAN states will probably argue that the situation in Indochina requires more extensive bilateral and perhaps multilateral security cooperation, although such cooperation is likely to remain outside the formal scope of ASEAN. The ASEAN states still believe that each state has the primary responsibility for its own security, and most have announced defense improvement schemes for which they hope to acquire some US assistance. [REDACTED]

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## ASEAN Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects

### *Nature of Existing Cooperation*

Security cooperation between ASEAN member states is almost entirely bilateral. This activity has increased in recent years, with Indonesia the main driving force behind the effort. Indonesia holds joint training exercises and participates in other military activities with most ASEAN members as well as with Australia and other non-ASEAN states. Indonesia's perception of its role as the natural regional leader would stimulate its military to seek such cooperation whether or not ASEAN existed. The main exception to the bilateral nature of ASEAN cooperation is an annual staff course attended by senior officers of all five member states. Although the sessions pay particular attention to regional security issues, all but Indonesia scrupulously refuse to label this an "ASEAN function."

Proposals for weapons standardization within ASEAN have not advanced beyond vague discussions, with Indonesia again the most prominent proponent. Such complementarity as does exist is largely accidental, the result of a preference by all five for Western, generally American, arms. Despite complaints by several states about the expense and slowness of US weapons deliveries, ASEAN military leaders still look first to Washington for aid and equipment. A general interest in increased local manufacture of equipment has led to discussions of joint production agreements for some items among ASEAN states. The only project to get beyond the talking stage so far is one between Singapore and Thailand, and that seems motivated more by commercial than political considerations. Weapons sales among the various states also arise largely from commercial motives.

A less obvious, but in the long run perhaps more important, aspect of bilateral military cooperation is the creation of a network of interlocking relationships among defense officials of the five states. Those between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand seem particularly close, and Singapore is evi-

dently developing close ties with Thailand, and perhaps, the Philippines. Indonesian military leaders have tried to use these ties to influence the foreign and security policies of other ASEAN states. Aware of the potential importance of this network and of Indonesia's key position in it, Lee Kuan Yew went first to Indonesian officials seeking support for his ideas of mutual defense cooperation. He expected that if they agreed, they would be able to sway their Malaysian and perhaps also their Thai counterparts.

### *The Impact of Indochina*

Concern about the potential Vietnamese military threat to Thailand has emboldened those within the various ASEAN governments who wish to give it a military dimension, but no ASEAN leader has any illusions that military assistance from ASEAN would be decisive in the event of a serious Vietnamese attack. Indonesia, in keeping with its ambitions as a regional leader, has offered to send volunteers to Thailand and may already have dispatched a limited number of observers.\* Thai sensitivities about the presence of foreign troops on its soil are likely to keep such an Indonesian force small, and in any event Indonesian military assistance would be of little more than psychological importance, a display of solidarity. The Indonesian Army's woeful showing against poorly armed guerrillas in former Portuguese Timor indicates it would be a very weak reed. Despite their talk about the need to help Thailand and their pressure for greater bilateral military cooperation in general, Indonesian military leaders have not been in the forefront of those arguing for multilateral military cooperation as part of ASEAN.

\* Indonesian military planners have long talked of creating their own regional strike force of highly trained and motivated troops that could be sent to any neighboring state threatened by internal or external attack. In the last decade Indonesia has sought a role for itself in the defense of various non-Communist regimes in the region, most importantly neighboring Malaysia but also for others such as Lon Nol's Cambodia.

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The rapidly changing situation in Indochina has also given greater momentum to implementing plans for expanding and improving the armed forces of individual ASEAN states, although other concerns are also important. All of the ASEAN armed forces are geared primarily toward handling internal rather than external security threats. Malaysia has indicated that it would like at least part of its armed forces trained and armed for conventional warfare, but in general the expansion plans of the various states do little to change their orientation toward internal security. The desire of some states, such as Malaysia, to improve their naval capability is based less on the public rationale of protecting the coasts from hostile attack than on the desire to turn away refugee boats from Vietnam. All find it useful, however, to cite the potential outside threat when seeking domestic support or foreign financing for their military programs. [REDACTED]

Few ASEAN leaders expect a direct Vietnamese military attack in the next five years, although they do not rule out the possibility of a limited strike against Thailand in retaliation for its support to Kampuchean resistance forces. All realize that if threatened by Vietnam, they would have to rely on outside powers, mainly the United States, for their security. Thailand and the Philippines have security arrangements with the United States; Malaysia and Singapore are part of the Five-Power Defense Arrangement with Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. They would expect little more than diplomatic and moral support from their ASEAN partners. [REDACTED]

#### **Constraints on Multilateral Cooperation**

The specter of Vietnam is a constraint against, as well as an impetus for, greater security cooperation. ASEAN leaders are mindful of Vietnam's potential reaction and sensitive to its allegations that ASEAN is anti-Vietnamese and a thinly veiled attempt to re-create the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The discussions among ASEAN leaders about what position to take on Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea and their continued reluctance to confront Hanoi on the refugee issue reflect the more general desire to avoid antagonizing Vietnam unduly. Some Southeast Asian government leaders, particularly in Jakarta, still hope that

Vietnam can be "domesticated" as a Southeast Asian state that will identify its interests with those of ASEAN, and they do not exclude the possibility of eventual Vietnamese participation in the organization. [REDACTED]

Divisions among ASEAN states about which state poses the greatest threat to regional stability and security, China, Vietnam, or the USSR, also work against a closer multilateral relationship. For the present, they defer to Thailand as the "frontline" state in its concern about Vietnam, but most are uncomfortable with Bangkok's present close association with Beijing on the matter of Kampuchea. The other four states believe China is a greater long-term threat, especially through its interference with overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Indonesia, and perhaps some of the others, see Vietnam explicitly as a buffer to Chinese expansion in the area. Singapore, although worried about Chinese subversion, believes growing Soviet naval power poses the greatest potential military threat to the area. Thai collaboration with China against Moscow's ally Vietnam also causes concern because it runs counter to the ASEAN states' desire to remain neutral in superpower conflicts and keep superpower competition out of the region. [REDACTED]

Political factors within the various states at times constrain efforts at cooperation. ASEAN is far from a monolith, and its member governments are internally divided about the proper role and policies the organization should pursue. A major internal division within most of the ASEAN governments is the one that exists between their defense [REDACTED] officials and their foreign ministries. Although all five governments are avowedly anti-Communist, foreign affairs officials have long favored policies that are "evenhanded" and designed to maintain good relations with Vietnam and other Communist regimes. The military, on the other hand, have tended to take a harder, more negative line toward Communist states, although in Thailand at least, some now seem to appreciate the need to soften this stand. The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea strengthened the hand of the hardliners, but their ascendancy may be more apparent than real and is likely to be only temporary in any case. [REDACTED]

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Perhaps the most important constraint to cooperation will be differing national interests and mutual suspicions among the ASEAN states—factors that continue to affect attempts at multilateral diplomatic and economic cooperation. These problems already afflict existing attempts at bilateral security cooperation. Thai-Malaysian cooperation against activity along the border by Malaysian Communist insurgents still suffers after many years' duration because the Thais are unwilling to commit sufficient forces to a problem they deem of low priority. At the same time, they have been reluctant to permit large numbers of Muslim Malaysian troops to operate in southern Thailand because of the lingering separatist Muslim insurgency there. Longstanding suspicions of Singapore caused Kuala Lumpur to refuse the Singapore armed forces access to Malaysian training facilities. A feud between Malaysia and the Philippines about Manila's handling of its Muslim minority and Philippine territorial claims against Malaysian Borneo prevent effective cooperation in patrolling the Sulu Sea. [REDACTED]

#### **Outlook**

Given all of these considerations, any formal or even informal multilateral arrangement for ASEAN security cooperation seems unlikely under present circumstances; a major increase in Vietnamese military pressure against the ASEAN states and a conclusion by them that the United States would not come to their aid would strengthen the case for an ASEAN military arrangement, although the constraints outlined above would continue to undercut its effectiveness. Bilateral cooperation among some of the states will continue to expand [REDACTED]

ASEAN leaders at the coming conference in Bali are likely to reiterate their belief that strong integrated national societies with stable economic development are the best guarantee for national security. They may even agree privately to some kind of ad hoc show of solidarity with Thailand against Vietnam. Military planners in the various states will undoubtedly press ahead with defense development programs and will certainly try to elicit a US commitment to assist them. Economic development, however, is still the top priority for all the ASEAN states, and their budget allocations will continue to reflect this fact. [REDACTED]

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